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UNCLAS DUSHANBE 002038

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/CACEN, SA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [SMIG](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: TAJIK GOVT INSISTS PASSPORT DECISION REVERSAL PRACTICAL NOT POLITICS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Tajikistan orders Tajiks to use international passports when traveling to Russia despite an Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) agreement permitting citizens to travel using internal passports. This affects up to one million labor migrants who do not have the expensive international passport. Tajikistan believes the use of an international passport will help to curb harassment from foreign border and law enforcement officials. Press reports claim they are also responding to pressure from Russian parliamentarians looking to reduce the number of Tajiks in Russia. Regardless of the type of identification, migrant workers face harassment, discrimination and hardship working in Russia. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) PolOff met with Amirsho, a Tajik labor migrant traveling to Russia for 10 years who has worked on construction sites in Moscow and Novosibirsk. His employers pay him \$500 a month for backbreaking work, digging wells and constructing walls. In the past, he and other migrants have lived on the open construction sites where they worked with no heating or running water. Now he shares a small flat with other migrants. Amirsho now faces a much more difficult time traveling between Russia and Tajikistan.

3. (SBU) The mandatory use of international passports for Tajik citizens to travel to Russia is a practical decision made in the best interest of Tajik citizens, not a political one, insists Igor Sattarov, Head of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a meeting with PolOff. Members of the EEC: Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus agreed to allow citizens to travel through each country with only their internal domestic passports, effective November 1. Although not legally required, Tajikistan is now "strongly encouraging" its citizens to travel with international passports. News sources report state-owned Tajikistan Airlines refused passengers entry onto flights without international passports.

4. (SBU) Tajik international passports cost approximately \$30. For most Tajiks, \$30 is their average monthly salary and an international passport is prohibitively expensive. In addition, illegal migrants who are already out of Tajikistan cannot apply for a passport in their host country. This new government directive affects the estimated one million Tajiks who travel to Russia for work. Remittances from labor migrants contribute to 15% of the Tajik economy. Restrictive conditions not permitting labor migrants to work could have a notable impact on the economy.

KEEPING TAJIK CITIZENS INTERESTS IN MIND

5. (SBU) A long negotiation over a list of acceptable travel documents began in February 2004. In January 2005, Russia insisted that Tajiks needed international passports to enter Russia. However, they relented when Tajikistan reciprocated and refused Russian citizens entry without international passports. A renegotiation began and in October the EEC agreed that internal passports could be used for international travel. Despite protests from Russia's Duma, the Russian government upholds the policy.

6. (SBU) Contrary to news reports, Sattarov insists the Duma's criticism is not the main factor in Tajikistan's decision. Sattarov explained the government recommends foreign travel with international passports because it is concerned Tajiks, particularly labor migrants would face problems while traveling through Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where some have been refused entry in the past without international passports. Although permissible, uninformed border officials may use the lack of an international passport to bribe or harass travelers. Sattarov also noted that Tajikistan worries Russia will change its mind once again and decide to officially require international passports.

HARD WORK IN RUSSIA IS BETTER THAN IN TAJIKISTAN

7. (SBU) Most Tajik migrant workers are laborers on construction sites, in factories or on farms. About 25% are professionals engaged in trade, education or law enforcement. A

slim group, about 3%, according to Embassy estimates, is involved with criminal gangs.

18. (SBU) Most migrants live and work in Russia illegally. Regulations stipulate registered migrant workers must pay 33% of their salary to the government. Employers also have to pay taxes, therefore it is not beneficial for either to register. Because of their illegal status, migrants cannot report crimes committed against them to the police and must pay out of pocket for medical services.

19. (SBU) Traveling to Russia is difficult. Without an international passport, militia and train inspectors are able to extract bribes easily. After arriving in Russia, life does not get any better. The Russia militia consistently beat and bribe Tajik migrant workers. Russian police have even stolen money from Amirsho and his fellow Tajik migrant colleagues. Sometimes the police raid the living quarters of migrant workers, accuse them of an arbitrary crime and fine them or threaten them with imprisonment. Amirsho's family is concerned for his safety and does not want him to return to Russia. Recent rumors of "skinheads" attacking migrants raise fears in the community.

110. (SBU) When asked if all the hard work, harassment, and physical and mental distress were worth it, Amirsho replied with a resolute, "Yes." Although traveling to and working in Russia is difficult, the financial rewards and benefits of supporting a family outweigh the individual costs.

111. (SBU) COMMENT: Tajik migrant workers, whether registered or illegal, are subject to discrimination in Russia. The Duma's objection to the use of internal passports may inflame mistreatment of migrant workers. However, migrant workers will still flock to Russia and other CIS countries for the financial opportunities, regardless of passport requirements.

112. (SBU) Russia's and Tajikistan's migrant labor and illegal immigration woes are much like the challenges faced by the United States and Mexico. While a difficult political issue for all four countries, a dialogue on the issue could be beneficial to all sides, especially if Parliamentarians and U.S. Congressional representatives are involved.

END COMMENT.
ARMBRUSTER

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